

## [William B. Biggs]

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FOLKSTUFF - RANGE LORE 3550 Words

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by

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Range Lore and

Cowboy Reminiscences before and after 1875 UVALDE COUNTY, DISTRICT #10

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WORK [?]

WILLIAM B. BIGGS

“Uncle Billie” Biggs is a much-loved figure in the town of Sabinal and is well known throughout the County of Uvalde because of his having come here when just a boy, his participation in Indian fights, and being one of the first old timers to come to Sabinal Canyon which was about the only settlement between Castroville and Eagle Pass at the time, except Quihi. “Uncle Billie” tells his experiences with much enjoyment especially

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to other old timers or to descendants of families he knew in early days. His animation, his use of by-gone expressions, his good memory and physical agility contribute to his amusing personality. Using his own words, the following facts and incidents of his life are told with the same enthusiasm he shows when dancing a schottische at dances he attends occasionally:

"I'll be 83 years old next month. December the 18th is my birthday. I was born in '54 and wasn't but about six years old when we come out here. I was born back in Tipton County, Tennessee, and after my mother died my father brought me and my brother, Jim, out here to this old fort up above Utopia. We got with an old man in San Antonio by the name of Jim Snow, and he had an ox wagon and hauled us out here.

"I recollect it took about five days to come out. You know Old Man [Santelabon?] lived over near Castroville and we stopped there to stay all night. It was raining when we got there and they insisted on us sleeping in the house. My father said he'd sleep in the wagon and us boys could sleep in the house. C12 - 2/11/41 - Texas

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Well, after we got in bed, the old man and old lady got to talking German to each other and it scared me nearly to death. I jumped out of bed and broke to the wagon where my father was and dived right in his arms. I had never heard any German before and he had to sit up most of the night holding me to quiet me.

"After we hit the Sabinal Canyon, we had just been up at the old fort about six days when John Ware and Elizabeth Fenley got married. Elizabeth was Old Man Johnny Fenley's daughter, the only daughter he and Aunt Edie had. They had been living there since '52 and it was about 1860 before we got there.

"The Civil war was just breaking out and my father joined the army. He was in Frank Robinson's Company and in Duff's Regiment. He left us boys with Uncle Johnny and Aunt Edie Fenley. Aunt Edie practically raised me and she was as kind and good to me as any

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mother could ever have been. I carried many a pail of water for her. I remember once that I started after a bucket of water at the springs and I slipped a big lump of brown sugar to take with me. She bought a big sack of this sugar and I just couldn't get enough of it. But I got such a big lump I could'nt eat it so I laid it up in a crevice of the old stake-and-rider fence where I could get it when I wanted it again. When I went back to get it, there wasn't a speck of it left. The sugar ants had carried all of it off.

"We had to watch for Indians up there. You bet we did. About the closest shave I ever had and I guess it was my first experience was one time when Aunt Edie took me and we started to visit John and Elizabeth. They were living down below us about four mile and Aunt Edie saddled up and put me up behind her and we started out. On down the road, we could hardly get the Old mare along so Aunt Edie says, 'Billie, get down and cut me a good switch,' so I got a good stout sycamore switch about four or five feet long and brought it to her. On down the road we saw about a half-dozen Indians 3 afoot. They was about a half-mile from us, but they seen us and started after us. When Aunt Edie saw 'em start for us, she jumped off that mare and put me in the saddle and told me to hold the mare in the road. Then she wrapped that mare's tail around her left hand and whipped her with her right hand and we hit that road in high places. She ran behind the mare and whipped her nearly every jump. No, mam, that mare never outrun Aunt Edie and when we hit that river crossing, we never checked. The water was nearly to Aunt Edie's waist, but she never paid no attention to water. You see, me and Aunt Edie was scared and the Indians wasn't and we outrun 'em too bad to talk about.

"In 1869, when I was about fifteen-year old, I made my first trail drive. My father took me and my brother, Jim, and five cow hands, an ox wagon, two yoke of steers, a Mexican driver and a cook and started to California with about five or-six-hundred head of cattle. We drove the cattle to Fort Stockton and stayed there for about one year and ran a dairy while we were there. Then in 1870, we decided to move on to California. Before we got to El Paso, we had to drive the cattle two days and nights without water and when they got

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within four or five miles of the Rio Grande, my father put all his men in the lead to hold the cattle back because they could smell the water.

“You know when anything has been without water a long time, sometimes they'll kill themselves if they get all they want at one time. But it wasn't any use trying to hold the cattle back to find a place for 'em to go down to water — they fall off the bank two or three foot high, on top of each other and fighting to get to that water. But the water wasn't deep enough there and none of 'em drowned. We struck camp right near El Paso and my father decided to go back to the river to look after the cattle and get them started around the town and as he knew there wouldn't be anything for the oxen to eat, he told me to go to town and buy hay for 4 them. Well, I went all over town and couldn't find any hay to bring back and when my father came into camp, he said 'Did you get the hay?' and I told him that I had tried but there wasn't any hay in that town. He said, why, son, you see that field right younder? That's hay. That's alfalfa! It was the first alfalfa hay I ever saw and I thought it was weeds. There was hay within a hundred yards of our camp but I had passed it by.

“After we left El Paso, we had a long, tiresome time of it. I stayed with the wagon, me and the Mexican. I could sleep if I wanted to and tie my horse to the back of the wagon. After we got in that Arizona desert country we had a time of it. On the desert , the sand was blistering hot. They say the sand is hot enough to cook an egg and I believe it for the cattle just wouldn't venture into it in the evening after we nooned. We would go to drive them out of the shade to start them on the trail and they'd bawl and lick their feet and run back to the shade. We couldn't do anything with them till it got cooler. That's a hot country out there and hard to cross with live stock. When we got off of that desert and struck the Gila River, the cattle wasn't so thirsty that time, but thy were nearly burnt up. The boys drove 'em down to the river to water and come back up to camp. After awhile, my father told me to saddle up and go with him down to the river to see about the cattle. So we rode off down to the river and when we got to the bank where we could see them, it looked like half of the herd was lying in the river, dead. My father said, 'Look younder! My cattle have eaten something poison and I believe they're all / dying!' Well, we got to them right

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quick and found that they were just lying down in the water and were chewing their cud. It was the first time I ever saw cattle lie down in the water and chew their cud the same as they would in the shade. But, I guess their hides needed soaking after coming out of that terrible heat.

"There wasn't much happened from there on in to California. We got to 5 Santiago County all right. But after we crossed the Colorado River and was going across the Imperial Valley, we had to drive the cattle day and night to get to California to water. My father and the cow hands went on with the herd and left me and the Mexican to bring the wagon on. Of course, we couldn't keep up with them as we were driving 'oxen to the wagon and they had to go on and leave us. While we were camped one night, close to town, a fellow come to camp and wanted to sell us some Irish potatoes. I never had heard of an Irish potato before but he talked me into buying fifty cents worth. He said we could cook 'em by boiling 'em in water till they was done so we took 'em. But we tried cooking them and never knew to put salt and pepper and grease on 'em and I don't reckon we got 'em done, either. Anyway, we couldn't eat the things and I threw the whole outfit away. But the Mexican went and gathered 'em all up. He said they was just what he needed to chunk the oxen with. He didn't have any rocks along the road and he needed the potatoes to pelt the oxen. So we made use of 'em while they lasted.

"Well, we stayed a year in Santiago County before we sold out. We came back on the railroad to St. Louis. After I got home, I clerked in a store at Sanders for about a year. Then I began working on different ranches for the old timers I knew. I remember once that I got into a fight with a fellow and got arrested because I gouged his eyes when the battle was pretty hot. They fined me twenty dollars and give me thirty days to pay it out. Well, I didn't know what to do about it. Then one day I met Old Man Chris Kelly and he asked me how I was getting along. I told him about the fight I had and about being fined twenty dollars. It looked serious to me and I told him I was afraid I couldn't get it by then. He pulled out his wallet and give me a twenty-dollar bill right there and told me to go settle

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up. I sure was tickled over it and went right over to Uvalde and paid the fine, but it seems like it took me six months to pay Mr. Kelly back. But I finally got it paid.

"After my brother, Jim, married we went into the ranching business over 6 on Big Seco several miles east of Utopia. We lived over there about four years before we finally moved over on the "Murlo" (Muela). The "Murlo settlement was about twenty-four miles west of Uvalde on the-old Eagle Pass road. We had to have better range and an Uncle Johnny and Aunt Edie and Joel, Demp and Jim Fenley had moved over there and had a pretty good little settlement, it was the place for me. I remember when we got there with our cattle, Aunt Edie told me not to stay at camp to come on up and stay with her.

"She was the best cook I ever saw. Law, I can see those big, old fluffy biscuits in that Dutch oven. She had a fireplace built up so she could cook without having to stoop so low. She had a stove too that she put in the kitchen because her daughters-in-law said she was too stingy to buy one. But she wouldn't use it, she preferred the fireplace and I tell you she could cook anything on earth. She charged about twenty-five cents a meal to transients that stopped there for you know the stage come right by there and that's where the passengers ate. I remember those big balls of yellow butter and gallons of buttermilk and big cheeses she made. She always had lots of chickens and eggs and she sold butter and eggs in Eagle peas. The stage would pick up this stuff and take it on in and it looked like she couldn't supply the demand. She kept meat on hand too for meat was plentiful. Many and many a night she got up and cocked somebody a meal when they come in cold and hungry. And do you know what she did with most of her money she took in there? She bought things for the grandchildren and different ones around her there. She always made money and had plenty to spend. She would go over to Eagle Pass and come back loaded down.

"We was over on the "Murlo" about one year when Steve Burchfield decided to take all his cattle to Kansas and sell out. We had about three-thousand head and he told us if we wanted to take some cattle with him to round up and catch him on the trail. Well, we had

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about six-hundred head we wanted to take so we got them together and caught him at Sabinal. That was in 1880.

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When we was fixing to get off, I was hurrying around there and getting things together and was wondering what I could do about the little, light buggy I had bought. I finally decided there was nothing to do but to put it in a shed and leave it. About that time, Aunt Edie come out and said, 'What are you going to do with your buggy while you're gone, Billie?' I told her I had planned to leave it there. 'Well,' she says 'I'll give you sixty dollars for it if you want to sell it?' I told her I'd sell it and she pulled three twenty-dollar bills from her apron pocket and gave it to me. I never broke one of those bills till I started home from Kansas and then it was to buy my ticket.

"Mr Burchfield had a chuck wagon, a cook and nine cowboys. Mrs. Burchfield went along and drove a hock and cooked for her and Mr. Burchfield. My brother's wife and little boy went along and she drove our chuck wagon and cooked for us. She was a fine woman and as pretty as a picture. Mrs. Burchfield was a blonde and she was also a pretty woman. It was awful tiresome on them but they never complained. We encountered Indians on the trip but they were beggars and we always cut out a beef and gave it to them. If we hadn't, they probably would have stampeded the herd and got what they wanted, anyway.

"The men were divided into three shifts for night herding. The boys always sang as they rode around them at night. We took them to Caldwell, Kansas, and all of us sold out our entire stock there. We / took the train home. Mr. Burchfield left for New Mexico after he sold out his outfit. He went there, I heard, and bought a good-sized ranch and stocked it. He He was doing fine till a bad drouth was ruining him and he was going to lose too many cattle. The bank told him, 'If you can't take those cattle and make anything on them, Steve, how do you expect us to?' They told him 8 to go back and do the best he could and check on them for expenses. Well, he went back and in no time, it begun raining and the range got fine, the cattle got fat and he made money on them. He paid up the bank and

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had plenty to carry on with and when he died, he owned half-interest in that First National Bank in El Paso.

"I knew Sam Bass and the Collins Brothers. They used to be in this part of the country and were pretty well known. They were bad men, too. I never knew Billie, the kid, but I was acquainted with Pat Garrett, the man who killed him. There used to be real outlaws in through here and in those days a man had to protect himself whether he was an outlaw or not. I remember that there was an awful hard man living over close to Uvalde. He had killed several men. He had a brand that was pretty easy to run over the F F brand that Joel Fenley run. Joel wasn't a bad man but he wasn't afraid of anything. (He was Uncle Johnny's and Aunt Edie's oldest son.) He kept finding his cattle with the brand run and one day he had come to town in Uvalde and found this fellow right in front of a saloon. He walked up to him and says, 'You've been stealing my cattle long enough. I found some more of them with my brand run yesterday. Now, if I find any more of my cattle branded your brand again, I'm going to kill you.' He looked him straight in the eye when he told him. Both of them had their guns on, but he couldn't have killed Joel because Joel was too quick for him and he knew it. Joel carried his gun inside of his belt on the front left side and he never missed his mark when he shot. I never heard of any more cattle being stolen.

"I have had some good horses in my day. I used to have one I thought a good deal of. His name was Sam and he was sure a cuttin' horse. I have a horse now that will jump anything you tell him. You can ride him up to a fence and climb over it and hold the rope and tell him to 'come over' and he jumps it like a circus horse. But, about the worst horse I ever saw was owned by Riley Mayses. He didn't know when to stop and could pitch the hardest 9 and look the meanest you ever saw. Riley was about the best rider I ever saw, too.

"I've taken many a long, hard ride in my day but about the worst ride I ever had to make was to get the doctor for a sick neighbor. It was a dark, cold night and I left Waresville, which is now Utopia, and had to go twenty mile below Uvalde to find the doctor. When I got there, I found that he had gone to Hondo so I started for Hondo. When I got there,

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I sent the doctor on and I took about an hour's rest for me and my horse and rode back home. That was about a hundred-mile ride in twelve hours.

"It used to take us about five days to go from Sabinal to San Antonio in our ox wagons. And in the days during and after the Civil War, we never had biscuits only on Sunday morning. Now, we can drive down to San Antonio in a couple of hours and come back and whether we eat down there or back home we have all the biscuits we want. But with all the conveniences, people don't know how to have a good time like we used to have. Why, we used to have camp meetings that lasted three or four weeks. Everybody would come and camp and listen to every sermon the preacher preached, for no telling when the preacher would get back this way. I remember one big camp meeting they had here one time. They sent for the preacher from back in East Texas somewhere and they got up money enough to carry the meeting for three weeks. They barbecued beef and goats and had plenty of other stuff to last for three weeks but at the end of that time, the joiners were still coming in. My wife's father wanted to keep it going another week but those who had already helped with it didn't want to help any more. But he felt like a good work would be wasted if it didn't run another week and he decided to finance it himself. He had laid away the money to pay the 10 shearers when they come to shear his goats but as he couldn't raise the money any other way, he decided to use that money and he said he believed there would be some way provided for his shearing expenses when time came. The meeting went on another week and he used his money and killed his own meat for the barbecue. They had a big week of it with lots of joiners. Then, a day or two before he was to shear his goats, a man by the name of Mitt Bandy came to the ranch and wanted to buy a big, black stallion that Mr. Thompson (my wife's father) owned. He sold the stallion for a good price and had the money he needed for the shearing expense.

"I never got married till 1883. But when I decided to settle down, I married Miss Maggie Thompson. She was Gid Thompson's granddaughter and a granddaughter of the first white woman in the fort up there where Utopia is now. We settled down on the ranch where we're living now and we celebrated our Golden Wedding Anniversary four years

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ago. Maggie is 72 and I am nearly 83. We still go to the dances when we feel like it. We have two children, Kenneth and Lonna who are both grown. We've had a full life and we've seen changes we wouldn't have thought possible in this country when we came here long ago."

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